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Love and Liturgy

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Love

Imagine, for a moment, that you are in love. Imagine with me the shape love takes in our lives.

What sorts of things do we do when we are in love? We want to see the person we love as much as possible. We want to talk to him or to just listen to him, hanging swooningly on every word. We find out everything we can about him — where he is from, the story of his life, what he likes and dislikes, the activities about which he is passionate. We want to do everything we can to please her — look our best, say the right things, be hip in whatever mode she is. Her friends become our friends. Sometimes this is easier to see in other people. They mention the name of their love interest every three sentences. They begin to rearrange their life, learning about things their beloved finds interesting, perhaps taking up an entirely new set of activities. Carnivores become vegetarian. We never see them because they are spending all their time with their darling and his or her friends.

These habits of love are not of course limited to romance. Think about the pop idols we have all “worshipped” — be it Bono or Britney, Michael Jordan or Dale Earnhardt — or sports teams we follow “fan”-atically. We buy everything that has their name on it and spend serious amounts of money to see them at a concert or sporting event. Some of us strive to look as much like them as possible, copying their hairstyles or fashion innovations; others of us deck ourselves out in clothes brandishing our team’s name. What we wouldn’t give to really get to know them, to become part of their world, their inner circle. We become friends with others who share our passion.

When we are in love, then, when we have a passion, it is obvious to ev-

everyone. It becomes a part of who we are. It becomes the center of our life. We take on an "identity." We yearn to be with the objects of our passion. We yearn to be like them. We give them our money (via the purchase of products or tickets or gifts). We spend as much time as we can with them. They shape our lives.

Equally, we could say that by looking at the shape of a person's life, we can tell who or what the person loves. By looking at how we spend our time and our money, by listening to the stories we tell and the language we use, by watching what identity we present in the world, one can tell a lot about who or what we love.

Who or what we love, then, plays a significant role in how we live, in how we act, in what we do. And what we do, how we practice our lives, our everyday activity — these are the questions of morality. Love, we could say, shapes the moral life. An exploration of Christian ethics or Catholic moral theology, then, requires first that we be clear on who or what we love.

To be a Christian is to be in love. It is to be in love with the God of Jesus Christ. Saint Augustine, in the fourth century, recognized that the Christian life is precisely about love. "Love God, and do as you please," counseled Augustine. Rather than opening the door to moral anarchy, Augustine was instead making a radical claim. If we truly love God, if God is truly the center of our lives in all the ways described above, what we desire — what "we please" — will be deeply transformed. If I love the Chicago Cubs, it will "please" me to do as many things as possible to satisfy that love. If I love another person, I would despair at the thought of "displeasing" her or him. If I truly love God, then it will please me to act in ways equally pleasing to God.

If we are Christians, then, if we love God, it should be obvious. In becoming a Christian, we have taken on a particular identity. The trinitarian God known through Jesus Christ becomes a part of who we are, the center of our lives. We yearn to be with God; we yearn, over the course of our lives, to become more and more like God.

To explore the Christian moral life, then, is to explore what it means to love God. Clearly, to love God is not necessarily easy. As even our brief meditation on love suggests, too many aspects of God's good creation compete for our love. From the time Genesis was written, Jews and Christians have recognized how easy it is to fall in love with and thus center our lives around some object that is both not God and not worthy of our adoration.

For this is what it comes down to: adoration — or better, worship.¹

1. Not accidentally, the marriage rite in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* long included the words between the bride and groom: "with my body, I thee worship," indicating

Thus we might say: worship is the beginning of the Christian moral life. The first question, then, in our study of Christian ethics is: Who or what do we worship?²

**“Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart,
with All Your Soul, and with All Your Mind . . .”**

For many, worship — or the liturgy, or the Mass — seems an odd place to start in thinking about the Christian moral life, in thinking about Christian “ethics.”³ “Morality,” it seems, is rather about obligations or rights or freedom or rules. Apart from the obligation incumbent upon Catholics to go to Mass and observe all those rubrics and rules for sitting, standing, and what to say when, worship seems about as far as one can get from Christian ethics.

Augustine, though, in the passage cited above, is riffing off the Great Commandment: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

not only the sacramental nature of marriage but also that even in the realm of human love we make a deep — even material — connection between love and worship.

2. Equally, one might claim that who or what we fear shapes our lives. It is not accidental that not infrequently in the Christian scriptures, God and God’s agents counsel: “Be not afraid.” Similarly, when those in Scripture stand in fear, God’s word to them is “Peace be with you.” Fear stands as the primary antithesis to love whose shape is peace, to the trinitarian kenotic love displayed throughout Scripture. And love stands as the antidote to fear, as 1 John 4:18 notes: “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.” Fear, as John continues, has to do with punishment; it is a sign of bondage, of enslavement; it is a characteristic of idolatry, that “imperfect” love that is misdirected at God’s creatures. It is also for this reason that central to the Gospels, to the work of Christ in the world, is the call to overcome idolatry and to worship rightly — the call to worship God as the one true God, the God above all other gods. A first step in the practice of Christian ethics, then, is to consider both what we love and what we fear.

3. In this chapter I use the words “worship,” “liturgy,” “Mass,” and “Eucharist” interchangeably, and I do so intentionally for a number of reasons. First, I wish to indicate that what is at stake here is not some automatic, robotic formative function of “the liturgy.” One can certainly attend Mass and simply go through the motions without actually “worshipping.” In this chapter, when I speak of “liturgy,” I am presuming that those engaged in the liturgy are equally engaged in worship. Second, the context of this chapter is Catholic moral theology; thus, the paradigmatic liturgical worship is the eucharistic Mass. Certainly the Mass is not the only venue within which God can be worshiped. God can be found in all places, and personal prayer-lives are equally critical. Sacramental practices carry us from liturgy to liturgy. But theologically, for a number of reasons outlined below, it is the Eucharist that norms personal or other corporate forms of prayer outside of the Mass. This priority of the Eucharist is crucial to maintain.

all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29-30). "This," Jesus said, "is the greatest and first commandment" (Matt. 22:37-38; see also Deut. 6:5).⁴

Why ought we to love the Lord? Because God loved us first and longs for our love. Augustine, in counseling Christians to "love God, and do as you please," is on good scriptural grounds. From Genesis through Hosea, through the Gospels and the Epistles and clear through to Revelation, one theme rings out resoundingly: God loves us, seeks us out, desires to be with us, waits for us to love in return. God loved us first, and, as banners at so many sporting events remind us, so loved us in fact that he gave his very self, his only Son.

And that Son invites us to become his friends. "No longer," Jesus tells his disciples, "do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends (*philos*)" (John 15:15 RSV). Friendship — *philia* — in the Greco-Roman context was a much richer practice than it often is today. To be friends meant above all to have the same mind, the same outlook, the same view of reality. Moreover, friendship was one of three senses of love (along with *eros* and *agape*).

Thus, God longs for our love and invites us to become his friends. God does so, the Christian tradition holds, because to love God and be friends with God is the fulfillment of who we are, of what it means to be human. One of the giants of Catholic moral theology is the thirteenth-century master of theology, Saint Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, one of the most fundamental Christian claims is that God created us. But why would God do this, and what for? God, Aquinas maintains, created human beings for happiness, for flourishing, for a good, full, human life. But importantly this "happiness" has a very specific shape and content. For we, being who we are, and God being who God is, real, true, ultimate, complete human happiness consists in one thing: enjoying union with God. (Thomas calls this "the beatific vision.")

Augustine echoes this claim: "Lord, you made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."⁵ God has made us for God's very self, to enjoy and celebrate in God's presence, to be nothing less than friends of God.⁶ This, then, is our "end" — the purpose for which we were made. If we are to be in sync with reality, if we are to fulfill the deepest pos-

4. In light of some of the chapters to follow, it is worth noting that Mark's version of this Gospel story has Jesus preface the statement of the Great Commandment with the Shema.

5. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated and with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 1.1.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.23.1.

sibilities of our selves, this is the goal toward which all of our life — in each moment and its wholeness — should move.

But for Christians this goal is not simply something that will be attained “in eternity,” after death. Too often we act as if God waits somewhere outside of time and geography, that the Christian life is just about following certain rules to ensure that one “goes to heaven.” But from the beginning, the church has recognized the much more awesome truth: Christ is risen. Christ — the incarnate Son of the living God, the God who broke into history in the greatest act of love — is here with us now. Therefore, Christ has made it possible for us to begin enjoying union with God, friendship with God, God’s living presence, now. God has made us for God’s very self and longs for us to rejoice in God’s presence — now, today, tomorrow, and every day of our life. As Saint Catherine of Siena rejoiced: “All the way to Heaven is heaven, because He said ‘I am the Way.’”

To be in God’s presence and to rejoice in it is nothing other than . . . worship! Worship — or liturgy — is the beginning of the Christian moral life because here we fulfill in a paradigmatic way the Great Commandment. It is here, in the Scriptures and the Eucharist, that we meet again and again God’s ultimate act of love for us — his laying down his life for his friends and his enemies. And what can we do but respond to the amazing gift of God’s love by loving God in return, praising God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and body? What can we do but worship?

Liturgy Is Not . . .

Admittedly, one problem immediately presents itself. Truth be told, all too often Mass is boring, irrelevant, just plain aggravating . . . or worse!⁷ It’s the same thing, week after week. People with no obvious skill lead the singing. We stand, we sit, we stand, we sit. The homilies exasperate congregants for different and contradictory reasons. Too many churchgoers are quite possibly the worst advertisements for Christianity there can be. And all too often we leave thinking, “I didn’t get anything out of that.”

Granted, too often liturgy is just badly done, and having people trained to do liturgy better would solve a myriad of problems. Yet, might the source of the problem lie elsewhere? Might it have something to do with how we have been trained to think about liturgy?

7. Elizabeth Newman provides a far better discussion of the problems that can plague worship than I offer here, in the second chapter of her book *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007).

Let us return for a moment to our reflections on love and friendship. If we think about the time we spend with our friends, we have to admit: most of the time we spend together is rather ordinary, not particularly exciting, sometimes actually aggravating . . . or worse! We do the same mundane things over and over — “hang out,” go to the mall, listen to music. Likewise with love — those whose romantic relationships have lasted beyond the rush of infatuation know that most of what goes on in a relationship becomes quite commonplace: candlelight dinners give way to leftovers; special dates give way to doing homework together or trips to Home Depot. A friend once told me that when she and her boyfriend lived three thousand miles apart, every time they got together was full of *passion*, but when they finally lived in the same city, were engaged, and got caught up in their studies, they realized that they had not passionately kissed for months!

As with friendship, so with the liturgy. Every Mass cannot be a “peak experience.” In fact, the church has even designated a large portion of the year as “ordinary time.” What matters is not that every single liturgy be absolutely transporting. Rather, as with friendship and love, what matters is the sum total of a life together. What matters is that we spend our life with God, knowing that many of the days will be ordinary, boring, aggravating (just think about those forty years that the people of Israel traveled with God in the desert). Equally, however, we trust that there will be moments of intimacy, joy, transcendence, delight.

If we continue to tease out the analogy between liturgy, friendship, and love, we might ask the question: What is the liturgy for? Too often people speak about the Mass as if it were about us. Liturgy, it is often remarked, has the job of “fueling us up spiritually for the week,” and if it does not fulfill that purpose, it has failed. Others speak of it as an entitlement, as something we have a “right” to participate in.

But like friendship and love, liturgy is not primarily about us! Love is ecstatic — it draws us outside of ourselves. Like all aspects of the Christian life, liturgy is designed to point away from us, to point to God. Liturgy, like authentic love, is supremely an end-in-itself. We do not love another person or befriend others *in order to* obtain certain ends beyond the relationship itself (though certainly other ends, like shared interests, community, children, and so on, often follow). Similarly, we ought not understand liturgy as a “means to an end.” We worship not *in order to* get something out of it.⁸ We

8. Robert Taft, longtime professor of liturgy at the University of Notre Dame, was known to remark: “What you get out of liturgy is the inestimable privilege of giving glory to the Almighty God.”

go to Mass simply to worship and love God. Aquinas, again, makes this point, noting that “we love God not for anything else, but for Himself.”⁹ God and our love for God that is worship of God are the ends for which we were made and must be ends in themselves.¹⁰

Clearly, of course, if we do this we cannot help but “get something out of it,” for one cannot worship and remain unchanged. In worship we stand in the presence of God, we stand before grace. And as grace, it will not change us by force. God is persuasive, not coercive. As the story of Scripture shows, grace waits with, at times, unbearable patience. Our task is to be open to it, like the seed that does not get choked out because it lands on rock, soil, or among weeds. Our task is to be ready for it.

Are we? Do we come to Mass excited to rendezvous with our friend and beloved? Do we look forward to Sunday, counting the days until we can “meet” our beloved? Do we, in fact, think of being Christian as being in a relationship, necessarily sustained by faithfulness between meetings? Most of us know what it is like to be in a relationship with someone who does not call us all week. What would it be like to get together, knowing that during the week our beloved or even our friends had been acting in ways inconsiderate of us, betraying our affection, disregarding those things that are important to us? Could the relationship last?

Analogously we can ask: Have we, as Christians, spent the week in a way that builds up our friendship with God, this relationship of love? Or do we too often betray the relationship — fail to acknowledge that we are even *in* this relationship, disregarding those things that are important to God? If you are like me, the answer here is, too often, “yes.”

This is why Catholics used to faithfully make their confession before going to Mass, and why the Mass still opens with an act of confession. Certainly confession as practiced prior to the Second Vatican Council presented its own set of issues. But the practice captures a fundamental question: Who do *we* have to *be* to participate in liturgy?¹¹ Do we live our lives

9. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.27.

10. Or to state it slightly differently, liturgy is not functional, utilitarian, a means toward some other end. The purpose of liturgy is not “to make us moral.”

11. That Catholics used to practice the sacrament of confession much more faithfully than we do now points toward the fundamental claim of this chapter, that worship is the beginning of the Christian moral life. For as is widely recognized, the sacrament of confession was also the primary context of the theological discipline of “Catholic moral theology” — a theological discipline that emerged after the Council of Trent and maintained a very particular shape up until the Second Vatican Council. Catholic moral theology as a discipline was integrated within an infrastructure of practices that presumed the centrality

during the week in such a way that we come prepared to rejoice in God's presence on Sunday, celebrating who God is and the amazing things God has done? Do we come to Mass prepared to meet our beloved? It is not that God will reject us if we are somehow not prepared (although that parable about the wrongly dressed wedding guest does always give one pause). Rather, if we have not prepared our lives, we will not be able to accept the invitation, hospitality, and love God offers when we meet. If we come with hardened hearts, will we not more likely refuse God's grace? The question when we come to worship is: Are we ready to respond to God's love?

"All the Way to Heaven Is Heaven"

In the early church, Christians gathered to celebrate *agape* meals, or "love" feasts. For they understood that when "two or three gathered," Christ had promised to be present, and thus where two or three or more had gathered, they were in the presence of God's love. And it is here, in our gathering, that Christians make clear who it is that loves us and who is the object of our passion.

For one thing, going to Mass makes it obvious. To worship is to make a public statement. It is a public act. In the New Testament the word for the church, for the gathering of Christians for their distinctive time of worship, is *ekklesia*. The word comes from a root that means "called out" and referred originally to an assembly of citizens who were called out of the affairs of their everyday work and lives because they had a particular identity or status. And so it is with liturgy. Here Christians are "called out" of the world. We assemble together as "church," as the body of Christ, as citizens of the kingdom of God.¹²

When we worship, then, we state plainly through our actions that we are Christians, those claimed by God's love. Because God so loves us, God becomes the one with whom we long to spend time, the one we yearn to be

of eucharistic liturgy for the Christian life. In many ways this connection between Catholic moral theology and the liturgy was lost after the Second Vatican Council. For our purposes, the practices of confession/reconciliation highlight two additional points that must be made in the context of this chapter and book — that the church is not a group of perfect people, and that the Mass does not magically make people better Christians.

12. Importantly, Christians do not worship alone — the liturgy is a gathering of the people of God, of the body of Christ. As much as people wish to construe faith and religion as "private," worship is a public activity. Whether done with "two or three" or a typical Catholic Mass of many hundreds, worship is a "public" act.

with. The traditional day that Christians gather for worship is an extension of the Jewish practice of the Sabbath. The Sabbath, as Genesis notes, is the day of God's rest, a day when all of humanity – and indeed, all living creatures – are called to rest as well, to simply spend time celebrating God and one another. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, in his splendid reflection *The Sabbath*, notes that the first thing God names as holy in the creation of the world is the Sabbath, the seventh day.¹³ This day, and not some sacred place, is the “space” where God and (later) God's holy people dwell together. And so it must be, for love is practiced not primarily through shared spaces but through spending time together.

This is why Josef Pieper, a twentieth-century Catholic philosopher, attempts to invert how we too often think about Sunday. Too often we see it as a day of rest from work, from our lives, a vacation, a respite that allows us to rejuvenate for the toil of our lives. Pieper, however, sees it the other way around. It is not, he maintains, that Sunday exists for the sake of the week, as a means to an end. To see it this way is to get it backward. Rather, echoing Aquinas, Pieper reminds us that Sunday, the Sabbath, is our proper end, that for which we were made. All else – our work, our weeks, our lives – should move us toward that end.¹⁴ As Jesus rebuked the Pharisees: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

While Christian worship is rooted in Jewish Sabbath practices, the early church moved its Sabbath from Friday to Sunday, to the “eighth day.” Christians dwell with God no longer in the last day of creation but in the first day of the new creation, in the eschatological time of the resurrection. As the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann claims, the liturgy is a moment where the eschaton breaks into time. The Orthodox refer to the Mass as “The Divine Liturgy,” for they maintain that in the liturgy we are, already, at the gates of heaven! In Mass we stand together with the saints in God's kingdom “already.” Here we learn to see not only that God created the world and all that is in it. We learn to see that God has acted to redeem that same creation, to make all of creation new.

Thus, one of the things that happens when we spend time with God is that we begin to see the world, to see “reality,” in a new way. We begin to see that we live in a world not of scarce resources but of abundant gifts. We begin to see that justice means not strictly “to each person her due” but rather

13. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 9.

14. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, introduction by Roger Scruton, new translation by Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), pp. 34, 54.

a “preferential option for the poor.” We begin to see that the victorious story of the world is not conflict and violence, but that true power is manifest through peace and reconciliation. And so on. And we learn this in a number of ways.

First, in liturgy we listen to God’s stories. We hang on God’s every word. We enter into the world of the Scriptures, the world of God’s Word, where we learn the story of God’s constant love for God’s people, and how that love opens up to the entire world through the mission to the Gentiles and the redemption of all creation. We learn what it means to be God, what it means to love, to be merciful, kind, faithful, and so on.

To really learn and understand these stories takes time. We are deeply shaped by a world of stories that are very different — stories of “nature red in tooth and claw,” the survival of the fittest, life as a zero-sum game, an eye for an eye. The Christian tradition, however, maintains that God’s story, that found in Scripture, is the truest version of reality, no matter how different the world might look day to day. People often say ethics need to be “realistic” — that Christians have to navigate in the “real” world and therefore make all sorts of compromises. But Christians proclaim that the world described in Scripture *is* the “real” world — that through Jesus’ incarnation, cross, and resurrection God initiated a new reality. As Saint Paul says, “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17 RSV). By hearing this story in worship, we come to see differently — to see all the world differently, to see the world truthfully.

The stories that shape us are critical for ethics, for we can only act and live in a world that we can see. If I believe the story of “an eye for an eye,” that will shape how I act. Until I hear the story of “love one’s enemies,” that cannot become an option for how I live.¹⁵ Moreover, it cannot become an option for how I live unless I practice it. Liturgy is one place where we practice how to do these things, where we learn what it means to live within this new creation. For clearly, God’s new creation operates according to different rules than “business as usual.” In worship we enter a space where by learning to see the world in a new way we are trained to act in a new way. Here we learn to “meet people, acknowledge our faults and failures, celebrate, thank, read, speak with authority, reflect on wisdom,

15. Returning to the practice of the Sabbath — that day when God rested from the work of creating and rejoiced in the goodness of creation — Rabbi Heschel reminds us that the Sabbath is equally a way of learning to see. In it we learn to see ourselves differently, as human beings, not as “beasts of burden,” that we were not created to be tethered to work, to be slaves, but rather were created by God to be free. Pieper makes this same point.

name truth, register need, bring about reconciliation, share food and our goods, week in and week out.”¹⁶

As we learn new ways of acting, these practices of liturgy help to train us out of the habits of our dominant culture. Take, for example, the practice of silence. In our culture silence is hard to find. Silence is uncomfortable, “dead air.” Silence is so foreign to our everyday lives that it can be used as an effective advertising tool — “silent” commercials function by playing off the noise that surrounds us.¹⁷ But silence in Christian and liturgical contexts has different shapes, different purposes. By practicing silence regularly — as a community of people being silent together — those who worship can come to appreciate the internal goods of silence. We become people who can practice silence beyond the time and space of Sunday morning, as we become increasingly sensitized to the function of noise in our culture.

It is for these sorts of reasons that the late Pope John Paul II called the liturgy “the school of holiness.” In the liturgy we dwell in God’s presence, we are given the opportunity to be schooled by grace, to become — through grace — holy, to become who we were made to be, the image of God. Too often Christians mistakenly identify some human character trait as the “image” of God in us — for example, our reason or free will or creativity. The early church theologian and bishop Athanasius, however, gets it right when he reminds us that the true “image of God” is Jesus Christ.¹⁸ To be the “image” of God is to be like Christ, he who “suffered death on the cross.” Thus it is in the liturgy that we learn who we are meant to be.

This is why the centerpoint of Christian worship is the Eucharist. Each time we come together for worship, we not only listen to God’s stories and practice living in the new creation. We equally stand again and again at the foot of the cross. We stand again and again in the presence of God’s greatest act of love, learning the extraordinarily difficult lesson of what *agape* looks like.¹⁹ Indeed, the Eucharist embodies the eschatological tension that characterizes the Christian life — placing us equally at the gates of heaven yet also, once again, at the original event of the crucifixion.

16. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), p. 7.

17. For a similar analysis see Michael Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998), pp. 73-82.

18. Athanasius, *First Oration against the Arians*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 4 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).

19. Reminding us that the Eucharist is centrally about love, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux describes her first communion as “the first kiss of Jesus” (*Story of a Soul*, trans. John Beevers [New York: Image Books, 1957], p. 52).

This person, this Jesus crucified, is the one whose name we bear, the one whose identity we have taken on. In bearing the name Christian we claim that he is the one we yearn to be like — in his living as depicted in the Gospels and in his dying, refusing to the end to allow hatred to determine his life, faithfully pursuing the course of loving his enemies in faithful obedience to God. Paul Wadell reminds us that although we have learned to approach the liturgy as something safe and comfortable and constantly reassuring, we ought rather to understand it as something terribly dangerous.²⁰ We risk becoming the bread of life whom we eat — we risk becoming the body of this Christ who died for us. For in partaking of Christ's broken body and poured-out blood, we are changed — as Augustine and Aquinas held — into Christ.²¹ We become a new creature.

Of course, grace works over time, our participation in the Eucharist being but an ongoing manifestation of our baptism. In baptism we are grafted into the church, which is the body of Christ.²² In that moment our fundamental identity is changed — we have *become* members of the body of Christ. This is part of *who* we are. We become Christ-ian. We might compare it to a national identity. Those born in Italy are, by birth, Ital-ian; they are of Italy; it is and will always be part of who they are. Through baptism, though, God takes us up into an identity that transcends all nations, into the body of his Son. And it is not simply that we become part of Christ (Christ-ian); rather, Christ becomes part of us. Or, in Saint Paul's even stronger terms, in baptism we "have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20).

But unlike national identities, Christians are, in the words of the early church theologian Tertullian, "made not born." Christian identity is given by grace at baptism. But like the disciples in the Gospels, who signed on early to follow Jesus, learning what that means and becoming capable of doing it takes time — takes, in fact, a lifetime. For the disciples it required

20. Paul Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practices of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), p. 16.

21. Wadell, "What Do All Those Masses Do for Us? Reflections on the Christian Moral Life and the Eucharist," in *Living No Longer for Ourselves: Liturgy and Justice in the Nineties*, ed. Kathleen Hughes and Mark R. Francis (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 167. See also Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.79.3.

22. Some people think that it is better to wait and let their children decide what religion they want to be, that it's wrong for parents to "push" their religion on their children, to "force" kids to go to church. But as David McCarthy says: "Why? We force kids to take math because we think it's good for them. Why wouldn't we make them go to church?" To maintain that one ought not to "force" religion on one's children is to imply that religion is not about truth.

dwelling with him, learning the Scriptures anew through his telling of them, submitting to his reproof and correction, learning new ways of acting and living, eating with him, and standing with him at the cross. It requires no less of us.

Thus, in the liturgy we gather as the church, the body of Christ, to dwell with the one whose identity we have taken. God — as God always does — takes the initiative, becomes present to us, reaches out to us again and again. We listen to his Word in the Scripture, learning again and again to see our lives and the world within his story, learning to see and judge the world as God does — which is most often the opposite of how we are inclined to see it. We train our bodies to live as he lived — to pass peace, to keep silence and listen attentively to God, to give abundantly of our gifts. We are formed in the habit of being receptive to God's action in the world. We come to know the fullest vision of "the good life," or God's life with us, standing at the gates of heaven, never forgetting that the shape of the Christian life this side of the gate is the cross — that this, as the Way, is yet heaven.

It means being schooled by grace. Grace, as Aquinas reminds us, transforms nature — it works on who we are to help us become who we were made to be. Think, perhaps, of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). He, who wanted but a glimpse of the Lord from a safe distance, got a lot more than he bargained for. Jesus spies him, invites himself to Zacchaeus's house; grace abounds and he is taken into it — and his life is transformed. Invited by grace, Zacchaeus becomes a disciple; he turns to follow Jesus.

"Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord"

Like Zacchaeus, we get more than we bargain for in liturgy. God reaches out to us through the Word, reaches down to us through the Eucharist, and calls us to follow. If we truly worship, we cannot remain unchanged. The liturgy calls us, challenges us, confronts us with the need to change how we live, to follow Jesus. Liturgy threatens to change us, to unsettle our safe, comfortable, and constantly reassuring lives. If not, something has gone wrong.

Worship, in other words, is the beginning of Christian ethics. In his first encyclical, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, Pope Benedict XVI states this pointedly:

Faith, worship, and ethos are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*. Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart. "Worship" itself,

Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. Conversely . . . the “commandment” of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be “commanded” because it has first been given.²³

Worship, in other words, is only the beginning. Worship is but that joyful response to being loved first, the celebration of what God has done for us, for God’s gracious gift of God’s self to us. In worship we comply with the “command” that we are happy to follow — to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul.

But that is not the end of the commandment. Jesus does not stop there. He continues: “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:39). The love celebrated in worship spills out beyond the time and space of Mass itself. Receiving the gift of God’s love, we carry it into the world, into our everyday lives.²⁴ If not, something has gone wrong. As Benedict notes: “A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.”

Benedict’s claim returns us to Aquinas. For Aquinas held that the *shape* of the Christian life was “charity.” Charity, he noted, is the *form* of the virtues.²⁵ Charity is an ancient theological concept whose richness has mostly been lost. Too often when used in our contemporary context, the word “charity” is understood as referring to donations of money or clothes we no longer want. It has connotations of “taking care of” the poor.

But for Aquinas and the Christian tradition, the word means far more. The Latin word for charity is *caritas*, “love.” So first and foremost to speak of charity is to speak of love. To be a person of charity is to be a person who loves. But just as happiness for Thomas and the Christian tradition had a particular content, so does love. For the love of charity is the kind of love manifested by God — not just a love that gives but a love that gives all, that creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), that gives abundantly, a love that by giving the self “empties” one of one’s self. This is the love we see displayed in the life of Christ. In theological language, this love is called *kenotic*.

23. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (*God Is Love*), §14. The encyclical can be accessed online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html.

24. The Orthodox refer to this as “the liturgy after the liturgy,” to signal that worship does not end (nor do we cease being church) when we leave the building. I am grateful to Elizabeth Newman for bringing this to my attention.

25. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.23.8.

The shape of the Christian life, then, for Aquinas, is given in the life of Christ. Christ, who was divine, “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Phil. 2:6). Rather than insisting on his rights, Christ took “the form of a slave” and became one of us. Out of love, God in Christ gave up the comfort and safety of divine existence to enter into the painful, scary, messy, and complicated world of human existence. And he refused to abandon this course of love, this love of God for humanity, even when faced with death, continuing to love even when that love was not returned.

This, of course, is the love we meet in the Eucharist. And it is this love that is to pass over into concrete practice in the world, the love we are commanded to bring to our neighbors. As we meet this love in the Eucharist, so we are — by grace — to incarnate that kenotic love in the world. God’s love — *caritas*, charity — is to become the shape of our lives. This is a love that does not give money or things, but is exemplified in solidarity, in face-to-face personal interaction. Thus, Christian charity is less about giving money than about *being with* others, spending time with them, especially the poor. As has been noted, “Christian witness will continue to be identified not by those to whom Christians give money but by those with whom Christians take time to eat.”²⁶

More specifically, charity becomes the “form” or “shape” of all the Christian virtues. Each virtue, from a Christian perspective, becomes redefined in light of kenotic *caritas*. Or, in more traditional Catholic terms, grace transforms nature (as will be discussed further in part 2). Thus, through the grace that we meet in the Eucharist, we are formed not only to practice, say, the virtue of justice, a natural virtue extolled even by the Greco-Roman philosophers. For Christians, justice looks different — for God’s ways are not our ways. Justice (trans)formed by charity not only renders “each his due,” but also knows that the last will be first. Justice is not simply “being fair”; it is also the preferential option for the poor. Likewise, charity (trans)forms what counts as virtue. No longer do the central virtues of Christians include pride, dominance, and self-reliance, as they did for the Greco-Romans, but now the spectrum of Christian virtues includes humility, patient endurance, and mutual interdependence.

Thus, theologically, the overall defining shape of the Christian moral life is *caritas*, self-emptying love, a love that seeks not its own interests but pours itself out in love for the other. But insofar as we meet this love first and foremost in the Eucharist, we might equally say that worship is the

26. Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion*, p. 42.

“form” of the Christian life.²⁷ Worship – worship that is really worship! – embraces a Christian’s life in its entirety; it cannot be compartmentalized into one hour a week. At the same time, it provides the overriding shape or character of the Christian life: the love at the heart of worship carries over in our minds, hearts, souls, and bodies and into the way we navigate in our day-to-day lives in the world. Worship changes us; so changed, we cannot help but live differently in the world.²⁸

Paul Wadell sums this up well:

What do all those Masses do for us? They should make us a new creation. They should help us live a paschal life. No one should be able to celebrate the Eucharist and remain the same. If that happens, something is wrong, the power of the Eucharist is being thwarted. What should happen is that through the Eucharist all of us are freed from sin for God. And that means we are free for life, free for peace, free for a happiness and joy we have never tasted before. It is the joy of God fully alive in us. When that happens, everything we are is worship, everything we do is good.²⁹

Christians, of course, live as these “new creations” not for their own sake, but – following Christ – for the sake of the world. We carry this *caritas* into the

27. Paul Wadell fleshes out this notion of worship as a “form” of life in more explicitly Wittgensteinian terms. He compares the journey of the Christian life to going to a foreign country. When we do so, we have to learn a new language, and as we do so, we cannot help but become at least somewhat different. Moreover, the point of becoming fluent is to become fluent. Languages are ends in themselves. As he notes: “Learning to be moral is something like learning a language. . . . The Christian moral life is nothing more than the ongoing endeavor to live from the good we call Jesus, a good that bonds us together and reminds us of who we want to be. This is why we can speak of Christian morality as a community’s conversation about the purpose and goal of its life. To have a language is to have a common way of life. To be a Christian is to be given the language of God that comes to us in Jesus and to embrace a way of life we call discipleship. As we speak this language of God we are formed in it, and as we live it we become one with it. In this respect, the goal of the Christian moral life is to become articulate in the Word we call Jesus; in fact, so eloquently that we are his presence in the world” (Wadell, “What?” p. 154). Citing Herbert McCabe, Wadell further notes that “to enter the Christian moral life is to allow the Word we call Jesus to become the grammar of our lives” (p. 155).

28. Here let me briefly note the importance of prayer, sacraments, and worship for the traditional Catholic notion of conscience. Conscience, a critical faculty in moral discernment, must for Catholics be shaped by worship (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1785; the *Catechism* can be accessed online at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm). For in our consciences we meet God, which can be nothing other than worship (*Catechism*, §1776).

29. Wadell, “What?” p. 169.

world because we believe that God's redemption is real, that it is possible for God's reality — met in the liturgy — to become just as tangible, obvious, incarnate, and experienced in our day-to-day lives. God has made not only *us* for God's self but also all of reality. God longs for all of the world to rest in him. Christians affirm that God has created all of reality and that, therefore, the end, goal, purpose of all reality is to move toward union with God.

Will the world be open to the incarnation of God's reality? Most often not. The cross of Christ testifies to that. Nonetheless, as followers of Christ, we are called to witness to God's gracious love and way of being. As Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells note: "Witness names the Christian hope that every action — whether for peace, for justice, for stability, for alleviating distress, for empowering the young and weak, for comforting the lonely, for showing mercy to the outcast, for offering hospitality, for making friends, or for earning a living — points to God, and invites an inquiry into the joy that inspires such actions."³⁰ Following Christ, those of us formed in worship are called to make a persuasive case for God's love to the world through the shape of our lives. On this journey we have, for companions, the saints — those whose lives have been shaped in diverse and phenomenal ways by an all-consuming love of God. From Augustine's *Confessions* to Saint Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*, the stories of the saints are stories of God's love for them and their burning love for God. Saint Thérèse tells the story of finding her vocation:

Charity gave me the key to *my vocation*. I realized that if the Church was a body made up of different members, she would not be without the greatest and most essential of them all. I realized that love includes all vocations, that love is all things, and that, because it is eternal, it embraces every time and place.

Swept up by an ecstatic joy, I cried: "Jesus, my love! At last I have found my vocation. My vocation is love! I have found my place in the bosom of the Church and it is You, Lord, who has given it to me. In the heart of the Church, who is my Mother, *I will be love*."³¹

Love God and do as you please. God's love for us and our passionate return, worship, is the beginning of Christian ethics, of the Christian moral life. Worship — where we meet and are given the gift of this *caritas* by God — becomes the place and time from which God works to transform the world. Through worship, then, the church lives not for its own sake but for the

30. Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion*, p. 19.

31. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, p. 155.

sake of the world.³² Just as through Jesus Christ God acted to bless all of creation, to redeem it, to call it to worship, rejoice, and live in God's new reality, so the church — the body of Christ risen and in the world — continues this work. And the work of Christ is, in the end, the Christian life.

Concurrent Readings

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae* II-II.1-46. Here he discusses the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated and with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin. New York: Penguin Books, 1961. The *Confessions* might also be called a love story, for in it Augustine waxes eloquent about his love for God and God's love for us and the world.
- Hauerwas, Stanley, and Samuel Wells, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004. Hauerwas and Wells provide a further introduction to seeing worship as the beginning of Christian ethics. The anthology includes a number of essays on particular topics, each seeking to think differently (and theologically) about the assigned topic out of the rich context of worship.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951. Heschel's book is valuable not only because it highlights the continuities between the Christian and Jewish traditions on the question of Sabbath worship, but also because it reorients how we think about worship.
- Newman, Elizabeth. *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007. Newman masterfully provides a thoroughgoing theological analysis of Christian hospitality and its implication for the life of the church. Of particular interest here is her second chapter, "The Strange Hospitality of Christian Worship," which argues for understanding worship itself as hospitality insofar as it is our participation in God's own triune life, which is God's hospitality.
- Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Introduction by Roger Scruton. New translation by Gerald Malsbary. South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1998. Pieper offers a Catholic version of Heschel's commentary on the Sabbath, although Pieper includes a more scathing critique of how the structures of the world work to undercut worship as our true end.

32. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America Press, 1966).

Thérèse of Lisieux. *The Story of a Soul*. Translated by John Beevers. New York: Doubleday, 1957. Like Augustine, Thérèse's story of her journey with God is a love story. The stories of the saints are nothing if not love stories; for that reason they are fun and fruitful to read.

Wadell, Paul. *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002. Wadell's book expands on the fundamental premise of this chapter and does so in thick dialogue with Thomas Aquinas.